

TECHNOLOGY

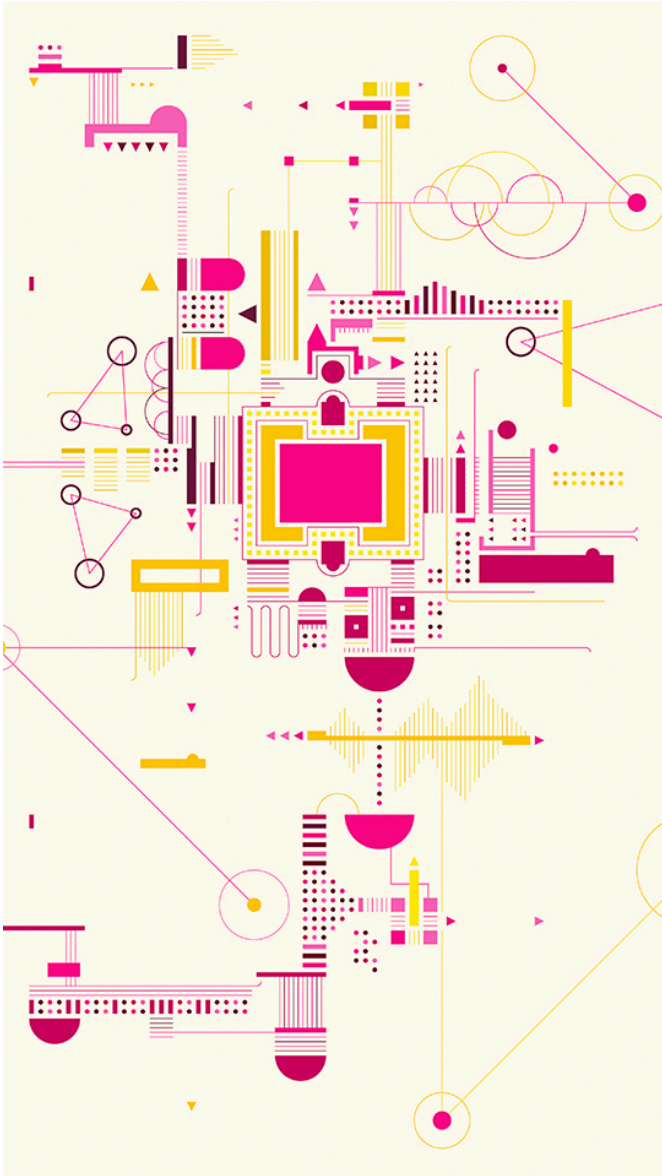
How Local Governments Are Using Technology to Serve Citizens Better

by [Steve Ressler](#)

JANUARY 12, 2016

In our connected, customer-centric world, customers have come to expect that their needs will be met quickly and frictionlessly – especially in cities, where Instacart delivers groceries to your apartment, Amazon provides same-day delivery, and Uber and Lyft compete to have a car to your door in minutes.

Local governments, however, have too often offered a different experience: forms that have to be printed and mailed; payments taken only in cash or check; appointments that have to be conducted in person and in offices open only from 9 AM to 5 PM (or 9 AM to noon on Fridays). This experience increasingly clashes with what city residents have been trained to expect from the likes of Zillow, Kayak, and Yelp. Thus we have a world in which citizens find it easier to compare pubs than public schools, to compare hotels than hospitals. It's a missed opportunity for governments not only to improve the lives of the people they serve, but also to demonstrate their value and increase civic engagement.



Some innovative local governments have realized this and are using technology and a customer-focused mind-set to innovate and better serve citizens, whether for setting up a business or renewing a driver's license. In our experience, the governments who really get it understand five key things, borrowed from the consumer digital/technology sector:

Scale matters. It sounds obvious, but it's so important that it has to be said. In the consumer internet sector, we understand that a large audience is everything: social networks become more valuable when more people sign up for them, and websites have more influence when more people read them. To have a substantial impact, government services need a substantial audience. When new apps allow residents to buy fishing licenses, check transit schedules, or pay their

local taxes on time, the impact adds up. Too many governments measure impact in terms of thousands of downloads or impressions, rather than tens of thousands or even millions. The ones who are really innovating aim bigger.

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Online and offline efforts have to mesh.

Successful government organizations use both offline and online touchpoints to build a digital audience. They offer subscription

opportunities at call centers, customer service touchpoints, and community events, or on their social media accounts. They optimize their websites to offer visitors opportunities to sign up for updates on specific content of interest. For example, to get more people signed up for snow emergency alerts, the city of Minneapolis advertises its GovDelivery alert subscription options on billboards, in mailings, and on its social media accounts. One cohesive message is used to get residents to sign up for snow alerts so they'll know the latest parking restrictions.

The citizen's government accounts should connect seamlessly. All too often, city governments require citizens to create different accounts for tasks like paying parking tickets, taxes, or trash pickup fees – even if all those services are on the same government website. Or in larger metro areas, each individual city may force you to install its own parking app; in some dense urban areas, you'd need three or four different apps to park within a five-mile radius.

This is an area in which governments actually have an advantage over private companies. Government agencies can partner with each other, sharing information and back-end databases to give citizens a more convenient, seamless experience. For example, we've created a network in our platform where after signing up for one government organization's information, the next screen offers users the option of signing up for other notifications from similar services or close physical locations. We've found that, on average, citizens sign up for one additional agency per registration.

Engagement depends on smart segmenting. To attain private-sector standards of engagement and conversion, government organizations must also segment and target their audiences – while also respecting citizen privacy. Communications specifically tailored to audience interests are more relevant, which makes those communications more likely to capture attention and engage citizens in programs and initiatives of value.

For example, to better coordinate sanitation services, the city of Louisville offers junk pick-up reminders to residents through GovDelivery, segmented by location. More than 12,000 households have signed up to receive text message alerts one week before and one day before junk is scheduled for curbside pickup. By proactively communicating on junk pick-up dates for residents, Louisville has been able to increase efficiency in its call center, cutting the number of calls to its 311 center regarding pick-up dates by 45% since 2013. In another example, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission sends a quarterly reengagement campaign to promote new programs, services, or topics of interest to existing subscribers. Further, the state of Michigan uses targeted campaigns and audience data to grow the number of foster parent applications.

Influencers improve engagement. Getting the right message into the hands of the right people creates a viral effect, and governments can and should tap into this phenomenon. A 2014 Pew Research study showed that fewer than 30% of adults completed common government services digitally. The key component here is that many citizens may not know about the digital offerings available to them. That's where advocacy marketing, finding key influencers to help drive your message across, can help.

But uncovering and leveraging these advocates can be a challenge. By identifying and speaking differently to highly engaged audiences, those who are more likely to share content with friends and family, organizations can capitalize on members of the public to help further disseminate their information. For example, King County, Washington, leverages insights into top sharers of digital content to determine cross-promotional campaigns they may respond well to. A citizen highly engaged with emails from a school district is likely to respond well to a targeted request to volunteer or support a school levy.

City governments around the world are on the path to offering a truly connected citizen experience. With the right technology and a well thought-out communications strategy, it won't be long before citizens receive a streamlined, consistent experience from the public sector.

Steve Ressler is the CMO of GovDelivery, the only digital communications platform exclusively for government, serving over 1000 public sector organizations and 100 million citizens around the world. Additionally, he is Founder and President of GovLoop.com, an online community of 250,000+ government leaders, acquired by GovDelivery in late 2009.

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Sean schoepper 2 years ago

Local governments' attempts at utilizing technology for a better the lives of its citizens are already being seen as of today. With things like apps to help you park in heavy urban areas or seamless accounts for citizens to accomplish all of their goals and pay off their fees simply. It is refreshing to see governments and organizations actually utilizing technology for more than just a gimmick. This is exactly what technology is here for. To gain something beneficial from it without letting it become overstaured as it is so dangerously becoming in our modern society. And for governments, the most controversial organizations out there, to see this is I think a wake up call for us all.

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